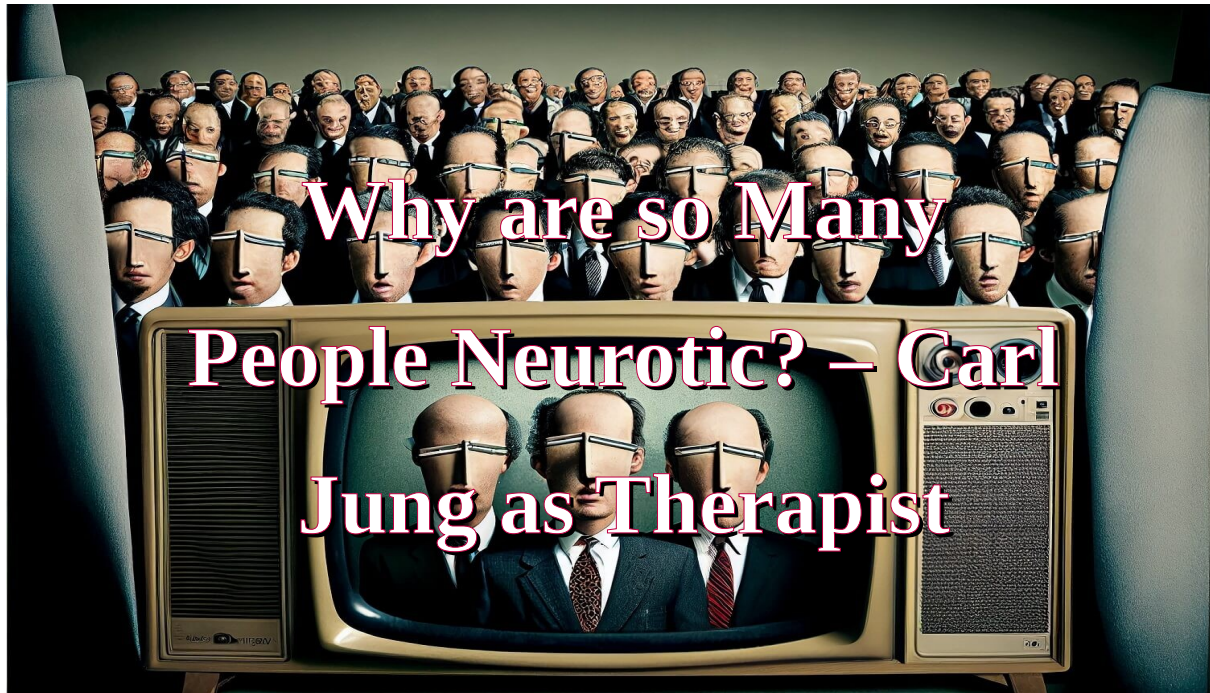




ACADEMY of IDEAS

FREE MINDS FOR A FREE SOCIETY



“There are just as many people who become neurotic because they are merely normal, as there are people who are neurotic because they cannot become normal. That it should enter anyone’s head to educate them to normality is a nightmare for the former, because their deepest need is really to be able to lead “abnormal” lives.”

Carl Jung, Problems of Modern Psychotherapy

With an education system that indoctrinates us to think alike, a mass media that ensures we fear alike, an advertising industry that gets us to like the same things, and a social media that makes it easy to shame and ridicule all those who step too far out of line, many people are conformists. But many in the modern day are also neurotic and so a question arises: Is there a cause-and-effect relationship between too much conformity and neurotic illness? The great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed there was, and in this video, we are going to explore what a neurosis is and how being too conformist makes us susceptible to this form of illness.

A neurosis is a psychological disorder defined by persistent and deep levels of anxiety and an overall fear of life. In addition to these cardinal symptoms, a neurotic illness may also include depression, guilt, phobias, obsessions and compulsions, excessive worry and rumination, insomnia, irritability, or anger. Carl Jung suggested that the neurotic’s fear of life was a result of “*a disturbed or diminished process of adaptation*” (*Collected Works Volume 18*) and “*a morbid development of the whole of a personality*” (*Collected Works Volume 10*). A neurotic, in other words, is an individual who fails to adapt to the demands of life, whose personality is stunted as a result, and whose existence, therefore, becomes a continual struggle with little, to no reprieve.

While a neurosis isn't necessarily fatal, it slowly but surely saps the vitality out of life. A neurosis destroys our potential, places us in the constricting confines of an ever-shrinking comfort zone, fills us with guilt for a life not lived, wreaks havoc on relationships, inhibits the cultivation of skills, and damages our physical health due to the effects of chronic anxiety and depression on the body. Jung went as far as to call a neurosis "*the agony of a human soul in all its vast complexity*" (Carl Jung, *The State of Psychotherapy Today*).

According to Jung, a neurotic illness is triggered by three conditions: Firstly, an individual is confronted with a challenge, task, or problem in an important domain of life. Secondly, because of cowardice, laziness, self-doubt, or just plain stupidity, the individual evades the challenge rather than facing up to it.

"If we follow the history of a neurosis with attention, we regularly find a critical moment when some problem emerged that was evaded."

Carl Jung, The Eros Theory

The existence of a problem that one wishes to evade is not sufficient to produce a neurosis. Rather a third condition is necessary and that is the use of defense mechanisms to force the problem out of conscious awareness.

". . . it would be a serious misunderstanding to confuse the existence of problems with neurosis. There is a marked difference between the two in that the neurotic is ill because he is unconscious of his problems. . ."

Carl Jung, The Stages of Life

Common defence mechanisms include repressing thoughts, displacing emotions, projecting one's problems onto another person, compulsive activity to keep oneself distracted, self-medicating into a numbed-out state, or avoiding situations that trigger awareness of one's problem. The use of defense mechanisms is paid for at the cost of increased anxiety, for as Jung wrote regarding one of his neurotic patients:

". . .by repressing disagreeable thoughts she created something like a psychic vacuum which, as usually happens, gradually became filled with anxiety. Had she troubled herself consciously with her thoughts she would have known what was lacking, and she would then have needed no anxiety states as a substitute for the absence of conscious suffering."

Carl Jung, The Development of Personality

Evading and denying the tasks of life is very common in the modern day, and this is contributing to epidemic levels of neurotic illness. Jung pointed to several factors that can account for this: Firstly, many parents pass onto their children a neurotic approach on to life. For children emulate the fear of life of the neurotic parent, and from an early age learn to evade life's problems, or as Jung explains:

". . .the psychic disorders of children are more often than not causally connected with the psychology of the parents, and in most cases one would do well to pay more attention to the faulty attitude of parents and educators than to the child's psyche, which in itself would function correctly if it were not disturbed by the harmful influence of the parents."

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18

A second factor responsible for the high rates of neuroses is an unwillingness of many young adults to adequately separate themselves from their parents as they approach adulthood. For to become an adult in-body, but remain a child in-mind, is to ensure one will be afflicted with a neurotic illness, or as Jung explains:

“Though it is a misfortune for a child to have no parents, it is equally dangerous for him to be too closely bound to his family. An excessively strong attachment to the parents is a severe handicap in his later adaptation to the world, for a growing human being is not destined to remain forever the child of his parents.”

Carl Jung, Child Development and Education

Social forces are also promoting the laziness and passivity that leads to the neurotic evasion of life's tasks. For example, there is an excessive use of addictive technologies, paternalistic governments that inhibit the cultivation of self-responsibility, diets that are sub-optimal for energy production, an overuse of psychotropic and recreational drugs, and a moral system that no longer elevates the virtues of courage and self-reliance to their rightful spot in the pantheon of values.

But while many reasons can account for the existence of so many neurotics, the important question for the sufferer is how to effectuate a cure? According to Jung the approach we should take depends on whether the problem we are evading lies in the collective, outer world, of people, places, or things, or in the individualist, inner world of our psyche.

“In my picture of the world there is a vast outer realm and an equally vast inner realm; between these two stands man, facing now one and now the other. . .”

Carl Jung, Freud and Jung: Contrasts

Problems in the outer world tend to take the form of failures to meet the basic demands of social life. For example, some people struggle to make friends or to establish intimate relationships. Others fail to attain gainful employment or to contribute to their community. Still others fail to develop an adequate persona, or social personality. These problems are of a collective nature in the sense that they represent challenges of life that all members of a society must face up to and Jung called cases of neurotic illness caused by evading these tasks instances of “*atrophied collective adaptation*” (*Collected Works Volume 16*). Individuals afflicted with this type of neurosis need to become more “normal” in the sense of cultivating the basic skills needed to function successfully in society.

“Previously, because of his illness, the patient stood partly or wholly outside life. Consequently he neglected many of his duties, either in regard to social achievement or in regard to his purely human tasks. He must get back to fulfilling these duties if he wants to become well again.”

Carl Jung, The Theory of Psychoanalysis

But some people meet all the demands of social life and attain all the trappings of worldly success – a spouse and a family, a satisfying social life, a good career, as well as ample material success – and yet still become neurotic. Or as Jung writes:

“...psychotherapists are familiar with the collectively adapted person who has everything and does everything that could reasonably be required as a guarantee of health, but yet is ill.”

Carl Jung, Principles of Practical Psychotherapy

The problem being evaded by these neurotics is not to be found in the outer world, but in the inner world of the psyche. Such individuals are afraid of their individuality and so fail to heed the call of their conscience to develop the idiosyncratic side of their nature.

“He is incapable of living his own life and finding the character that belongs to him.”

Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation

These neurotics are too normal, they are too conformist, and their social success acts as a barrier to exploring the depths of the psyche. But as the development of the individual side of our nature is just as imperative as our collective development, a failure to adequately differentiate ourselves from others will make us neurotic, or as Jung writes:

“There are large numbers of people for whom the development of individuality is the prime necessity, especially in a cultural epoch like ours, which is literally flattened out by collective norms . . . In my experience there are. . .very many for whom the development of individuality is an indispensable requirement.”

Carl Jung, On Psychic Energy

To be healed the all-too normal neurotic must experience a symbolic death, or the letting go of much that is familiar and comfortable, so the individualistic side of his nature can emerge, or as Jung puts it:

“That the highest summit of life can be expressed through the symbolism of death is a well-known fact, for any growing beyond oneself means death.”

Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation

Character traits, relationships, career choices, and especially habits of thought and behaviour, many of these must be sacrificed to permit the birth of the new. Our desire for social validation must be sacrificed as well, and so too the comfort we derive by conforming. For to paraphrase Jung we need to be “*drawn out of ourselves onto other paths*” (V16) that permit the full flowering of our character.

“[The neurotic] must in very truth take the way of the individual life [path] he has recognized as his own, and continue along it until such time as an unmistakable reaction from the unconscious tells him that he is on the wrong track.”

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 7

If we have spent years or decades treading the conformist path of normality, establishing a more idiosyncratic approach to life may seem risky. We may face ridicule, disappoint others, or lose some of our social status, but as Jung writes:

“If you want to cure a neurosis you have to risk something. To do something without taking a risk is merely ineffectual . . .”

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 11

But remaining neurotic, is also a risk – but a risk that offers no reward. We will waste our life, waste our potential, and be destined to live out our days plagued by anxiety, depression, self-hate, and guilt. And for those afflicted by the neurosis of too much conformity we should keep in mind that some of us are just not fit to be normal by modern day standards, we need an abnormal existence in order to be healthy, or as Jung writes:

“Among neurotics, there are not a few who do not require any reminders of their social duties and obligations, but are born and destined rather to be bearers of new cultural ideals. They are neurotic as long as they bow down before authority and refuse the freedom to which they are destined.”

Carl Jung, Some Crucial Points in Psychoanalysis